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*Tadeusz Rachwał*

## **Tropes of the Erotic: Amerigo's America and the Question of (Postmodern) History**

To sleep with Pocahontas  
And find out how she felt  
Neil Young

Oh my America, my newfound land  
My kingdom, safest when with one man manned  
John Donne

According to Georges Bataille, eroticism exists on the margin of history, on the margin of what he calls "history proper" which is the political and military history of the world.<sup>1</sup> In order for eroticism to appear in human consciousness, he claims, it is necessary that history eventually ends, that human existence becomes an ahistorical activity and thus an expression of eroticism.<sup>2</sup> What is thus at stake, it seems, is in fact some change of historically shaped consciousness into a consciousness in which the mode of our being is not subject to political/military (hence historical) categorization of events, but a peaceful "relaxation" from the convolutions of the clamorous world at constant war.

The title of Bataille's essay, *L'Histoire de l'érotisme*, is thus a misleading one, and it tells us, perhaps, that the text we read is an attempt at presenting the marginal, the without history, as a history of repression by history, and thus as a history of the production of ourselves as "captive men" whose power is seen as unquestionable regardless of their/our obvious bankruptcy.<sup>3</sup> Historical man is forgetful of eroticism broadly understood by Bataille as desire of otherness which historicity as it were erases by imposing artificial limits beyond which humanity ends. The end of history envisioned by Bataille is thus also the end of man conceived of as

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Bataille, *Historia erotyzmu*, tr. Ireneusz Kania (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1992), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

a historical being, the end procured not so much by focusing on the marginal, as by a withdrawal of the centre, which thus produces what Bataille calls "the sovereignty of the erotic". This sovereignty is not understood as any kind of domination, however, but as an absolute autonomy which, literally, does not serve anything. It is, in Bataille, the notion of "serving" which is responsible for the through and through utilitarian system in which everything serves something else, and where nothing is sovereign. With the end of history, it will be impossible to mistake the sovereign position of eroticism with its potential usefulness.<sup>4</sup> Eroticism made useful, purposeful, is sexuality, another domain of historicity whose workings Bataille finds also in psychoanalysis. Eroticism as such, on the other hand, cannot become a subject of any disciplinary gaze which always banishes it to the sphere of shameful silence unbecoming to man and thus depriving him of the possibility of autonomous existence. What is at stake in eroticism, Bataille claims, is "something sovereign which cannot serve anything".<sup>5</sup>

The end of historical man in Bataille is not, as it might seem, a prognostic of a return to nature pure and simple, to animalism in which sexual desire is satisfied in an unrestricted manner. Imposition of certain restrictions upon sexual behaviour is part and parcel of human condition. These restrictions, however, as taboos, as long as they remain within the sphere of visibility, constitute a part of human experience as a possibility of transgression. It is the denial of the existence of this sphere, its repression, that enslaves man to "another world", or realm, in which humanity is redrawn as a one-dimensional, rigorous constitution.

What distinguishes prohibition from repression, as Foucault phrases it, is that the latter operates

as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know.<sup>6</sup>

Bataille's apology of eroticism, as he admits, is, in fact, an apology for humanity whose strength consists in the possibility of its coexistence with what seems to be its denial. Humanity, as he somehow pathetically claims at the end of the *Introduction*, will cease to exist on the day it stops being what it is – a tangle of violent contrasts.<sup>7</sup> Bataille's eroticism, as it should now be more or less obvious, is not a category limited to sexual behaviour. The "tangle of violent contrasts" with which, or in which, humanity is bound to exist is a realm of which otherness, however violently, partakes and which it also constitutes by way of simultaneously undermining it. Bataille's erotic is thus a non-category of sorts whose liberating strength enlivens the "captive man", without, however, offering him a total, boundless liberty, without a dissolution into otherness, into the wild, or the dead

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (Penguin Books, 1981), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Georges Bataille, *Historia* . . . , p. 12.

(Bataille also sees death as a fearful sphere of the erotic which is also the sphere of discursive prohibition).<sup>8</sup> Hence the impossibility of constructing the erotic in Bataille, implicit in his postulate of the ahistoricity of the erotic, of the fallacy of defining it as a category separate from that of living. Rephrasing Heidegger, we might say that “erotically man dwells”, that one’s being is always being erotic. In yet other words we might say that we are always facing our own otherness which, unlike the unconscious, is not governed by any rules or principles available at least to a psychoanalytically trained eye, but whose very existence is motivated by the potentiality of transgression which does not serve, as we have seen, any purpose, which has no teleology or history, but which offers us a sovereignty, a trace of autonomy without entirely subjecting us to our own subjectivity.

Putting it bluntly, Bataille’s eroticism is the sphere which evades what is traditionally, or historically, recognized as the erotic, say, the sphere of sexual attractiveness which awakens desire. Bataille’s “erotic” is as it were transsexual, a liberating (if not revolutionary) force which also promises a political liberation from history. Hence also the necessity of a dehumanization of humanity, a postulate whose negativity is denied by Lyotard in his *The Inhuman* as different from annihilation:

Dehumanized still implies human – a dead human, but conceivable: because dead in human terms, still capable of being sublated in thought.<sup>9</sup>

Postmodernity posits its “inhumanity” as something still conceivable in the context of what it denies. Lyotard’s hypothesis concerning putting the unrepresentable in presentation itself as a mode of “understanding” the postmodern seems to have much in common with Bataille’s attempt at “deerotization” of the erotic and translating it into a conceivable, though not quite presentable (by history, for instance), sphere where sexual differences of men and women seem to be not so much irrelevant, as already overcome. What seems to characterize the discourse of the postmodern is the programmatic avoidance of constructing something which might be suspected of a presentation of something presentable. “The unrepresentable”, “the inhuman” or “the erotic” are in fact equivalent terms which, like indexes, point at something desirable simultaneously stopping short of presenting what is being pointed at and thus disabling a possibility of satisfying the desire.

As, generally, a critique of “the proper”, the discourse of the postmodern, as it were by definition, refuses any kind of satisfaction by way of possession or accomplishment. What it only allows for is some sort of penetration of the Other without a promise of any finality. If for Freud, for instance, the approach of otherness, once recognized, necessitates recognition and symbolization,<sup>10</sup> postmodernity leaves it unrecognized and unexplored without really giving it a name or

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, tr. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Sigmund Freud, “The Theme of the Three Caskets”, tr. J. Strachey, in Dan Latimer (ed.), *Contemporary Critical Theory* (San Diego . . . Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 489–499.

a shape and only ostensibly, perhaps pointlessly, pointing (where “to point”, like Barthes’ “to write” is an intransitive verb). Postmodernism, in other words, refuses to choose by way of positing the Other as inevitably there, and only made inaccessible, inhabitable by man, by the metaphysics of presence whose power to name and thus to make present, which the postmodern attempts to overcome.

Writing about the figuration of death as woman in “The Theme of the Three Caskets” Freud posits choice against necessity in a clearly erotic context:

Choice stands in the place of necessity, of destiny. In this way man overcomes death, which he has recognized intellectually. No greater triumph of wish fulfillment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women.<sup>11</sup>

Such a translation of death into an erotic figure is, from the postmodern perspective, an example of appropriation and domestication by discourse which actually deprives death of otherness by rendering it as an object of selection and desire. The replacement of choice for necessity, which Freud reads as a compulsion of sorts, deprives the vision of death of what Bataille calls horror and decay.<sup>12</sup> It also creates a vision of eroticism deprived of terror and thus desublimates the erotic and posits it as a sphere of some purely aesthetic possession. Perhaps it is this mechanism of “eroticization” of the Other in the Freudian sense that is responsible for the very possibility of the postmodern which sees in it, rightly or wrongly, a mechanism of repression which, in postmodernism’s feminist versions, is the phallogocentric imposition of masculine order upon otherwise, say, androgenous world.

This question of “eroticization” of otherness and of its repressive character also seems to be an important issue in any discussion of the world both temporally and topographically distant from where Bataille’s, say, postmodernist voice comes from. The “discovery” (and, for a number of reasons, this word should remain in quotation marks) of what is now called America is an event (perhaps historical, but it is the very idea of a “discovery” of a populated territory which poses a serious metahistorical problem) in which the erotic, intrinsically embedded within the question of the other, plays a crucial role. Christened with Vespucci’s feminized first name, America, perhaps like Freud’s death, is a figure of a woman inviting penetration and domestication.

In Stradanus’s (Jan van der Straet’s) engraving of “America” the continent is discovered by Europe personified in the figure of Vespucci. America is presented there as a naked woman rising from a hammock and inviting Amerigo to come closer. Though “invitingly erotic”, as Peter Hulme notices, America first of all invites its name, a mark of identification which will endow it with a substantiality which otherwise would remain undiscovered:

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 497–498.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille, *Historia* . . . , p. 70.

So Vespucci discovers America. America lies there, very definitely dis-covered. And from Vespucci's mouth comes the letters of the word AMERICA, as he recognizes or names this naked woman, speaks *her* name, which is *his* name feminized.<sup>13</sup>

What seems to be paradoxical in this representation of America is that in order to become an erotic object of desire, the continent must be both "undressed" and simultaneously named and thus as it were gendered as a woman. It is the very gesture of representing America as a woman that involves some kind of translation into familiar terms. By endowing this woman with his own name, Vespucci in fact performs a marriage ceremony. As a wife to Mr. Vespucci, America can now be re-constructed as an already European territory whose eroticism can now be held within the limits of this paradoxical marital bond in which whatever there was before the discovery had, say, no say. If, as Peter Hulme suggests, "European civility – can only guarantee the stability of its own foundations by denying the substantiality of other worlds and other words"<sup>14</sup>, it can do so only by projecting this stability upon what it finds insubstantial. The "other worlds and other words" are thus rendered insubstantial exactly by way of naming them as such, as worlds and words which, though perhaps distant and "other", are already familiar. What thus takes place is the reduction of otherness (in which Bataille found a sphere of the erotic), a repression which renders the other as unattractive, chaotic, and actually nonexistent.

Stradanus's body of America is also, quite evidently, a projection of an Indian woman. Yet her femininity is, as I have already noticed, constructed by rendering her as already domestic and named. What is thus achieved is the legitimization of sexual possession by marriage which also rhetorically legitimizes the possession of land along with its inhabitants. What might be seen as a rape, is now seen as a socially acceptable cohabitation in which desire is both restrained and controlled from within. This figuration of America as a married woman is also a projection of some generalized femininity upon the non-European, upon men and women as well as upon the land itself. "Safest when with one man manned" (see the epigram above), a woman without a man is unsafe, she is an other which, at least according to an author known only by his initials T.E., does not quite exist by herself:

In this consolidation which we call wedlock is a locking together. It is true, that man and wife are one person; but understand in what manner. When a small brooke or a little river incorporateth with the Rhodanus, Humber or Thames, the poor rivulet looseth her name; it is carried and recarried with the new associate; it bareth no sway; it possesseth nothing coveture. A woman as soon as she is married, is called *covert*; in Latin *nupta*, that is "veiled"; as it were clouded or over-shadowed; she hath lost her streame . . . Her new self is her superior; her companion, her master . . . All women are understood either married, or to be married, and their desires are to their husbands.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Hulme, "Polytropic Man: Tropes of Sexuality and Mobility in Early Colonial Discourse", in F. Barker et al. (ed.), *Europe and its Others. Essex Sociology of Literature Conference*, Vol. 2 (Essex, 1984), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> T. E., *The Lawes Resolution of Womens Rights* (London, 1632). Quoted in S. Findley, E. Hobby, "Seventeenth Century Women's Autobiography", ed. F. Barker et al., *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century. Essex Sociology of Literature Conference* (Essex, 1980), p. 13.

An unmarried woman is thus a tributary which does not flow anywhere, a creature "to no point inclined", and thus insubstantial in the organization of the world and actually a stranger to its constitution. Her destiny is to be veiled by a new name without which her old one is as irrelevant as if it was no name at all. An unmarried woman and an Indian are thus either to be potentially married or not to belong to society/humanity at all. As Helen Carr notices, in the language of colonialism both the non-Europeans and women are seen, with the same ambivalence, as part of nature rather than culture:

... either they are ripe for government, passive, child-like ... needing leadership and guidance, described always in terms of lack; or ... they are outside society, dangerous, treacherous, emotional, inconstant, wild, threatening, fickle, sexually aberrant, irrational, near animal. ...<sup>16</sup>

A legitimately possessed woman accepts the leadership and guidance of the "master" thus becoming elevated to the sphere of the culturally regulated eroticism which also defines "sexual aberration" as a prohibited sphere of uncontrolled or unrestrained sexuality, "the other" eroticism which, as Peter Mason notices, "Vespucci and his fellow voyagers found it hard to resist".<sup>17</sup> As Vespucci, perhaps against himself, himself reports describing Indian women:

The women, as I have said, go about naked and seductively, but their bodies are attractive and clean enough. Nor are they as shameless [*turpis*] as one might perhaps suppose, because the fact of their being well filled out makes shamelessness less apparent, since it is covered for the most part by their excellent body structure. We were surprised to see that none of them had sagging breasts and those who had given birth did not differ at all from virgins with respect to the shape and size of their bellies. The same is true for the other parts of the body, which I shall gloss over for decency's sake. When they had the opportunity of having intercourse with Christians they were driven on by excessive lasciviousness and threw all decency to the wind.<sup>18</sup>

Contrary to the appearance of their bodies which Vespucci actually renders as a kind of dressing covering their shamelessness, the Indian women are lascivious and indecent within. Though erotically attractive, their lasciviousness excludes them from the sphere of a decent eroticism. As it seems, the Christians engaging in their lasciviousness are not indecent at all, and their role in the experience seems to be that of decent observers who take part in the lascivious enterprises of Indian women against their will. "The other bodily parts" which Vespucci sees and does not mention "for decency's sake" are a part of the same discursive construction of eroticism as both attractive and appalling, as human and inhuman at the same time. What the composed bodily constitution of the women produces is of course

<sup>16</sup> Helen Carr, "Woman/Indian: 'The American' and His Others", in F. Barker et al. (ed.), *Europe and its Others. Essex Sociology of Literature Conference*, Vol. 2 (Essex, 1984), p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America. Representations of the Other* (London and New York, 1990), p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 171.

a promise of the future correction and improvement, of conversion to the preferably marital sexuality of the old continent.

Interestingly, what Vespucci's gaze sees in Stradanus's engraving is also the illustration of what Vespucci decently leaves almost unmentioned in the above quotation. "The other bodily parts" of the Indian woman, just as in Vespucci's story, are invisible to the viewer, and the only person who can somehow experience them is the brave Christian voyager. Vespucci (in the engraving) "experiences" America with a banner in hand, fully dressed, with an armour, and with a sword partly visible at his side. The Indian woman, like the American continent, seems to be an already familiar and domestic creature who awaits and invites this peculiar penetration. Yet the compass in Vespucci's left hand opens up a certain uncertainty, a fear of losing the sense of direction within the unmapped, though already named with his own name, territory. Lest the Indian lasciviousness, loss of control over the erotic behaviour, become, say, too attractive a discovery for others, the discoverer hides what he sees from the discourse which is supposed to reveal the American reality. What is left unspoken or unseen is simultaneously rendered as undesirable, as perversion or monstrosity of sorts. Hence, as Peter Mason notices, "Vespucci's famous account of the inhuman cruelty of the women who enlarge the sexual organs of their males by applying venomous insects to them, sometimes leading to castration".<sup>19</sup> Sexually overactive, Indian women threaten with a loss, which is also translatable into economic terms as wastefulness.<sup>20</sup> What is thus justified and legitimized is the appropriation of America along with its people via implantation of the idea of property upon otherwise generally improper territory of the Other. Juan Gines de Sepúlveda, for instance, quite literally uses the argument of the lack of the idea of private property in Indians in order to support his classification of them as *servi natura*, as natural slaves, the notion which he borrows from Aristotle. Indians, he declares, are as inferior

as children are to adults, as women are to men. Indians are as different from Spaniards as cruel people are from mild people. . . . Compare then those blessings enjoyed by Spaniards of prudence, genius, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those *homunculi* in whom you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity, who not only possess no science but who also lack letters and preserve no documents of their history except certain vague and obscure reminiscences of some things in certain paintings. Neither do they have written laws, but barbaric institutions and customs. They do not even have private property.<sup>21</sup>

Mild Spanish *conquistadores* are thus to endow Indians with humanity which they are short of and whose main exponents are private property, institutions, and, quite significantly, history. What is also inscribed in Sepúlveda's text is skepticism as

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Juan Gines de Sepúlveda, *Demócrates segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (Madrid, 1951). Quoted in Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians. As Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1959), p. 47.



to the possibility of conversion rendered as a lack of the properly human features in the very bodily constitution of Indians. Indians are *homunculi*, small people whose enlargement is quite unthinkable. Although Sepúlveda constructed his theory of Indian character without ever having visited America, his *Demócrates segundo* (though opposed in the 1550s by more tolerant thinkers like Bartolomeo de Las Casas), regardless of the fictional basis of his theory, actually legitimizes the conquest which, in his view, is actually an act of justice, a just punishment for Indian sins and obscenities. "How can we doubt", he asks, "that these people, so uncivilized, so barbaric, so contaminated with so many sins and obscenities. . . have been justly conquered by such an excellent, and most just king as was Ferdinand the Catholico and is now Emperor Charles, and by such a humane nation which is excellent in every kind of virtue".<sup>22</sup>

Naturally small, Sepúlveda's Indians are also naturally, contaminated from within with some innate sins and obscenities. This contamination, as an extension of the projection of lasciviousness of Indian women (and of women in general) upon the whole people, endows attractiveness with threat in colonial discourse. If, as we have seen, the attraction comes from the perfect beauty of bodies, a projection of virginity and willful submission which promises a "married" co-existence and penetration, the simultaneous threat originates in the possibility of the existence of some Indian autonomy and hence of independent human subjects in Indians. Such an autonomy, as an only superficially attractive autonomy without properties (proper ethical codes, but also private property and hence the privacy of the subject), if once allowed to be active, became a threat of destruction, both physical and epistemological, of the European subjects and subjectivity. This alternative autonomy, perhaps reminiscent of Bataille's autonomy of the erotic discussed in the beginning of this paper, becomes the subject of discursive repression exactly as the fearful sphere of the other whose very presence, however distant, threatens with the possibility of loss.

The lurking fear (to use the title of H. P. Lovecraft's story a little out of context) of loss, is also the fear of getting lost (Vespucci's compass), of losing one's identity whose stability can only be granted by restraint whose lack is rhetorically projected upon the eroticized body of the continent. The lack of sexual restraint in Indian women, their sexual wastefulness, is also projected upon all Indians as an ethical deficiency *in extremis* which is, of course, cannibalism. To the threat of being raped by Indian women who nothing but look for an opportunity of having "intercourse with Christians" there is thus added the threat of being eaten which is also present in the background of Stradanus's engraving in the form of a human leg roasted in a bonfire. What is thus articulated, though in the background, is the "Spaniards' greatest fear [which was] that they would be assimilated, literally absorbed, by being eaten" and thus find a tomb in an Indian belly – a fear quite literally expressed by Bernal Diaz in his *Conquest of New Spain*.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions. The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 136.

The foreground of Stradanus's engraving seems to be bridging the distance between Europe and (its) Other by indicating the possibility of a marital link or relationship with its promise of safe "entering the space of the alien", as Stephen Greenblatt phrases it in his brilliant discussion of Diaz's fascination with destruction of Aztec cities. The seemingly marginal presence of the cannibal feast in the background, on the other hand, erects an obstacle which makes the possibility of "an acceptance of the other in self and the self in other"<sup>24</sup> actually unthinkable. The erotization of America serves only the purpose of its identification, of naming it as an object whose autonomy is, by the same gesture, denied. Indians become, via the initial identification, again "one with the forests and beasts" and thus actually vanish as human beings.<sup>25</sup> Later, in the Protestant version of the conquest, "The vanishing Indian was a dream born of desire. [The dream of]. . . the American Adam, who creates himself autochtonically and, instead of Eve, mates with a Virgin land."<sup>26</sup>

Though the Spanish conquest of America did not insist so strongly on the production of the new, self-reliant individual, what is at stake in it is also a construction of a "virgin land, which, according to Greenblatt, is achieved by way of "complete estrangement" of the Other.<sup>27</sup> Following the initial (the foreground of Stradanus's engraving) identification as the erotic, the Other is then estranged as alien and threatening (the background of Stradanus's engraving) thus justifying its possession not exactly as an object but as something which, as the other, does not have any properties of an object. In other words, what is opened up is a paradoxical sphere of desire to possess without an accomplishment in possession, a desire which can be satisfied only when its paradoxical object (which is not quite an object) disappears. Since, perhaps, the only way to possess and not

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 135.

<sup>25</sup> Helen Carr, "Woman/Indian. . .", p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. The dream of autochthonic self-creation can also be found in texts which seemingly have little to do with colonial discourse. Satires on women, a genre flourishing in England in the second part of the seventeenth century, generally ridiculed women for inconstancy, both sexual and, say, constitutional. Robert Gould, for instance, claims that:

No more the Wind, the faithless Wind shall be  
A *Simile* for their Inconstancy,  
For that sometimes is fixt; but Woman's mind,  
Is never to one Point inclin'd.

Robert Gould, "Love Given O're" (1682), in *Satires on Women* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1976), p. 8. Hence the dream of finding an unpopulated land where one could establish a constant society with some more constant companions verbalized by Richard Ames in "The Folly of Love" (1691):

Oh! were there but some *Island* vast and wide,  
Where *Nature's* *Drest* in all her choicest *Pride*; . . .  
Producing all things which we useful call,  
As *Edens-Garden* did before the *Fall*; . . .  
There with a *Score of Choice Selected Friends*, . . .  
We'd Live, and could we Procreate like Trees,  
And Without *Womans Aid* –  
Promote and Propagate our *Species*.

*Satires on Women*, p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous*. . . , p. 135.

to possess, to possess and to simultaneously destroy is to eat, to consume, Greenblatt, quite rightly, I think, summarizes the sixteenth-century Spanish enterprise (using the figure of cannibalism) as one which

is fanatically dedicated to swallowing the whole vast land mass and all of its peoples. Theirs was the greatest experiment in political, economic, and cultural cannibalism in the history of the Western world.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps it is not just word play that in order to consummate, to complete and make perfect, one first has to consume, to devour, eat or destroy. There is no history without a destruction: "history, cannibalistic and necrophagous, constantly calls for new victims, for new events, so as to be done with them a little bit more", writes Baudrillard writing on the illusion of the end of history.<sup>29</sup> In Bataille, history was the limit of the erotic, a construction and consummation of the present constitutive of the absence of autonomy. What makes Bataille's reading of the erotic relevant for an analysis of colonialism is, exactly, this absence, and actually depravation, of autonomy by way of erotizing the spheres which, seemingly, have nothing to do with eroticism.

The erotization of America discussed above is but an example of this construction whose result is, perhaps inevitably, a banishment to pre-history, a consumption of the transgressive by a narrative, banishment into the stomach of historical narration for which a beginning is necessary. It is not by coincidence then, that the autonomy of America, of any conquered territory, must begin with a date, be it a date of discovery, of a battle, of a declaration. Eroticization is, in a way historicization, a rhetorical subjection to the possibility of being possessed. History feeds upon the (erotic) desire which it simultaneously denies and excludes as limitless and lascivious, and hence anti-historical because impossible to be accomplished within its "ethics of finality", a phrase which, epitomizes the presence of the erotic within Western epistemology in its teleological figuration of truth as a desirable woman, preferably naked, though possible to be fully possessed. Perhaps it is the very idea of accomplishment, of finality, of full possession that Bataille's eroticism questions and posits as repressive of the autonomous eroticism, as a limit which is also its own the end.

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In the Capitol in Washington one picture from among the series illustrating the beginnings (or pre-history, as Peter Hulme has it<sup>30</sup>) of the United States, the state of Virginia is represented by Pocahontas, an Indian woman who in 1607, when she was twelve years old, supposedly saved John Smith's (one of Virginia's leaders who was captured by Pamunkey Indians)) life throwing herself over his body

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, tr. Chris Turner (Polity Press, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Peter Hulme, "Polytropic Man. . .", p. 27.

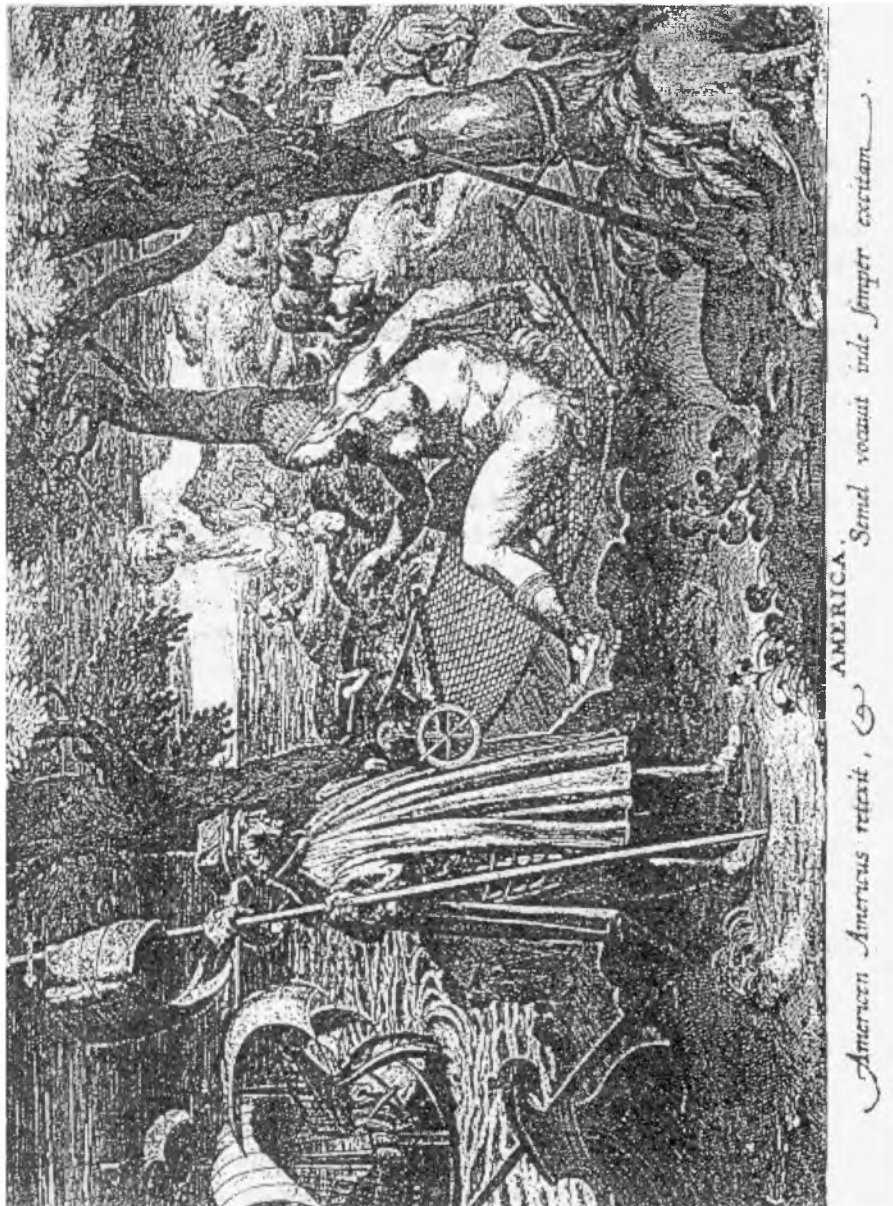


Fig. 1. Source Th. Galle, after "America" by J. Stradanus

just before he was to be executed. Then she was kidnapped by the colonists, baptized and given the name of Rebecca (Pocahontas meant "Little Wanton"<sup>31</sup>), and then married a colonist of the name John Rolfe with whom she visited England in 1616. She died on board a ship which was to take her back to Virginia in 1646. The Capitol picture shows the scene of her baptism, the moment when "Little Wanton" becomes Rebecca. She also had a clan name, the first one – Mataoka – whose meaning history does not record.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 26.

Tadeusz Rachwał

### **Tropy erotyczne: Ameryka Amerigo Vespucciego a kwestia (ponowoczesnej) historii**

#### **Streszczenie**

Artykuł stanowi próbę analizy erotyzacji Ameryki jako kobiety w dyskursie kolonialnym w kontekście postmodernistycznego odczytania kwestii erotyki przez Bataille'a w *Historii erotyzmu* jako pozahistorycznej sfery represji. W dyskursie kolonialnym owa represja dokonuje się poprzez nadanie uporządkowania topograficznego, w którym nie ma miejsca na autonomię, nawet na nazwy własne miejsc geograficznych. „Ameryka”, jako rodzaj żeński imienia „Amerigo”, stanowi dyskursywną wersję kobiety europejskiej, obiecując dokonującym jej podboju uległość i chęć wejścia w związek, którego retoryka jest retoryką związku matrymonialnego.

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### **Les Tropes érotiques: L'Amérique d'Amerigo Vespucci et la question d'histoire (postmoderniste)**

#### **Résumé**

L'article analyse le processus d'érotisation de l'Amérique traitée comme une femme dans le discours colonial dans le contexte de la lecture postmoderniste de la question d'érotisme considérée par Georges Bataille (*Histoire de l'érotisme*) comme une sphère de répression extrahistorique. Dans le discours colonial, cette répression trouve son expression par la mise en ordre topographique d'où est exclue l'autonomie et même les noms propres de lieux géographiques. „L'Amérique” étant la version féminine du prénom „Amerigo”, constitue une figuration discursive de la femme européenne en promettant à ceux qui partent à la conquête la soumission et le désir de former une union dont la rhétorique est celle d'un couple officiel (matrimonial).